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ABSTRACT

The interaction of environmental and structural factors is explored in this case study of innovation in a junior high school. It is argued here that when diffuse or ambiguous environmental pressure for substantial change are combined with a differentiated structure, the frequent result is that organization participants develop vague, symbolic agreements. These are particularly likely to develop when there is considerable time pressure. Such agreements tend to conceal potential goal conflicts and leave technical details unclear. Attempting to implement symbolic agreements then results in unforeseen technical difficulties and conflict, frequently leading to rejection of the innovation. The paper concludes with a discussion of some alternative approaches to innovation that may help readers avoid these difficulties. Information for the case study was gathered over a 3-month period by means of observation, extensive interviews, and questionnaires given to the faculty. (Author)

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A CASE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: INTERACTION OF ENVIRONMENT AND STRUCTURE

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Introductory Statement

The Center's mission is to improve teaching in American schools. Its work is carried out through five programs:

- Teaching Effectiveness
- The Environment for Teaching
- Teaching Students from Low-Income Areas
- Teaching and Linguistic Pluralism
- Exploratory and Related Studies

This report presents a case study conducted by staff members of the Environment for Teaching Program.

ABSTRACT

The interaction of environmental and structural factors is explored in this report as a case study of innovation in a junior high school. While some analyses of organizational innovation have emphasized an organization's structure as affecting innovation, and others have emphasized the importance of environmental pressures, the interaction of these factors has rarely been studied.

It is argued here that when diffuse or ambiguous environmental pressures for substantial change are combined with a differentiated structure, the frequent result is that organizational participants develop vague, symbolic agreements. These are particularly likely to develop when there is considerable time pressure. Such agreements tend to conceal potential goal conflicts and leave technical details unclear. Attempting to implement symbolic agreements then results in unforeseen technical difficulties and conflict, frequently leading to rejection of the innovation. The paper concludes with some alternative approaches to innovation that may avoid these difficulties.

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Implementing the Innovation

The nature of the innovation. The innovation at Hillview was systemic rather than localized; it affected all departments and almost all individual roles. Moreover, it implied a complete revamping of the school program rather than a few minor changes at a time. Indeed, few parts of the school program remained unaffected. Scheduling was changed from a semester system to a quarter system, and included double periods for all subjects (these were new to most departments). Students were to be given greater choice in selecting their program, although many requirements were retained. House periods were planned for alternate days, and were to provide counselling on students' programs and schedules as well as affective relations between teachers and students. To promote interchange between students of all grade levels, student composition of each House was to be as varied as possible. Changes were made in the counselors' roles, in report cards, and in the attendance system as well. In short, the innovation involved major reorganization of the whole school.

Technical difficulties. Faculty members returning to school in September had no clear idea of what to expect, but it did not take them long to discover the extent of their difficulties. Many specifics of the innovation had not been worked out over the summer, notably the scheduling system. Its increased technical complexity created difficulties in programming, and Hillview began the school year with only 40 percent of its students properly scheduled. As a result, House periods during the first month and often longer were fully taken up with individual scheduling problems, which was not a propitious beginning for creating an "affective atmosphere." House teachers, untrained in scheduling techniques, often felt awkard and incompetent at this new task. Moreover, when they did get around to other activities, they found they had almost no guidance on what to do with their House students, and were given no extra materials or support to help them with their new role. Many teachers soon came to look upon their House as an unwelcome extra course in an unstructured situation that they often found uncomfortable.

The general atmosphere at Hillview began to resemble that of a crisis situation, the more so because the school's policy in response to the problem was a "seat-of-the-pants," day-to-day kind of adjustment to immediate problems rather than a long-range, consistent plan for future contingencies. Teachers, overwhelmed with scheduling problems, faced an unstructured House period that they somehow had to lead, while students, often bored by lack of direction in House, responded by cutting it. Both the administration and the teachers were concerned over the growing lack of student discipline, and the school schedule was constantly being adjusted in an attempt to regain command of the situation. The innovation had got off to a very rocky start.

Conflicting goals. Technical difficulties were not the only source of problems. In some ways, the innovation itself seemed to be directed to a number of conflicting goals simultaneously. The innovation was intended to give students increased choice. However, at the district's insistence most requirements were maintained, so that student autonomy was in fact unchanged. Aside from this, it was difficult to reconcile the idea of increased student autonomy with the creation of a warm social environment in a school as large as Hillview. When students change teachers more frequently they may indeed have greater choice, but they are less likely to get to know their teachers well. In a smaller school, where students circulate among a small number of teachers, the objectives of choice and close relationships could be pursued at once with greater hope of success. The creation of a warm, supportive environment in House was hindered by the fact that it was made compulsory. The formation of a cohesive group was precluded in most cases, for students had little choice as to their teacher or classmates in a House unit and frequently resented being forced to attend. Moreover, since incentives that could promote cohesiveness, such as valued activities, were rarely provided by harried teachers untrained and unaided in their new role, House periods often became unstructured periods of boredom for students.

Teacher Reactions to the Innovation

To most Hillview teachers, the innovation was an extremely upsetting experience, and many complained bitterly about the difficulties it had caused. The new scheduling system had created unprecedented technical problems, and the House Plan had led to a lack of role clarity. Should House teachers be schedulers, group therapists, counselors of individual students, minicourse specialists? Many House teachers felt that having a House imposed the burden of an extra course without extra compensation. Their feelings of injustice were intensified by the fact that a few teachers had managed to avoid having a House because they had not supported the idea in the spring. In the general confusion, decision making also became much more difficult and cumbersome than before. Faculty meetings (often ad hoc) increased in frequency and required more time and effort from teachers, adding to their irritation. Many felt that they had seen the future and it did not work; they would have been glad to return to the tried and true ways of the past.

The vehemence of many teachers' reactions to House suggests how strongly they disliked teaching in an unstructured setting. ("My House should be called 'Zoo'"; "It should self-destruct"; "House is just another confrontation in a day filled with confrontations.") Other faculty members, while often critical of some aspects of the innovation, did not want to admit defeat. ("I am very supportive of the original ideas behind House, and unwilling to give up.") These teachers were harking back to the idealism attached to the proposed innovations initially, and they continued to support the ideals despite the problems created in implementing them. This may be an effect of selling an innovation idealistically; some support persists, since ideals can never be proved wrong.

Departmental differences. In many ways, the faculty's attitudes toward House came to represent their more diffuse feelings of support for the innovation as a whole. Table 2 shows how these attitudes differed by departments. The more structured departments clearly were least favorable to House.

TABLE 2

Departmental Rankings on Mean Reported Satisfaction with House (N=49)

Department	Rank on Satisfaction (1= least satisfied)
Foreign Language	1
Math	2
English	3
Physical Education	4
Science	5
Social Studies	6

When departmental rankings on attitudes toward House (Table 2) are compared with the three rankings on preferences shown in Table 1, there are quite strong relationships across departments. The strongest predictor of attitudes toward House appears to have been preferences on the proportions of required and elective courses. These preferences varied systematically by department with attitudes toward House, and the rank orders are almost identical (rho=.97). Preferences on how long to keep students also show rankings very similar to attitudes toward House (rho=.89). Comfort with students in informal situations is a somewhat weaker predictor of attitudes toward House (rho = .76). From this comparison, it seems clear that teachers in the more structured, sequenced curricular areas were least favorable to this type of innovation.

Rankings of the major departments on their influence in determining policies, reportedly by the teachers in those departments (Table 3), also show interesting relationships to departmental attitudes toward House. The most influential departments (math and social studies) are practically at opposite poles in their attitudes toward the innovation.

Thus, it is not surprising that there was considerable tension and conflict between members of different departments.

TABLE 3

Departmental Rankings on Mean Reported Departmental Influence (N=29)

Department	Rank on Influence (1= most influential)
Social Studies	1
Math	2
Science	3
English	4
Foreign Language	5
Physical Education	6

Criticism of the administration. As the crisis continued, more and more teachers became critical of the way the innovations were being implemented, and began to direct their criticism to the administration. Their statements convey a feeling of injustice. ("In previous years changes seemed to have a sense of legitimacy, but this year's innovations have a sense of imposition"; "The administration's lack of success in planning has increased. Those in charge of the innovation have presumed too much on the goodwill of Hillview teachers to help them out of the crises that the innovations have created.")

There were conflicting views on what the administration's role should be, however. Some felt that their current predicament pointed to a need for greater faculty participation in decision making, to ensure that such injustices would not be perpetrated again. Others looked for stronger leadership from the principal, feeling that it should be his role to deal with the problem rather than leaving decisions to the teachers. ("There is too much decision making. Somewhere in the administration some decisions should be made for us." "Frequently in our democracy. Why not administrators trained to organize schools in efficient patterns. Why let the staff vote and make a mess?") Sometimes both views were expressed simultaneously in a single statement. ("We are lacking a quality of leadership. The faculty doesn't have any sense of participation in the decisions that are made.")

Administrative Response

The dilemma in leadership. The conflicting expectations of the teachers posed a difficult dilemma for the principal. Since the faculty were not united in their views, it was difficult to exert strong leadership; no matter what position he took, he was bound to offend some teachers further, something he could ill afford to do. On the other hand, the greater the chaos became, the greater also was the need to "pull things together" and make decisions that would resolve the difficulties. For a man who until this year had been a highly respected, well-liked principal, the unaccustomed criticism was a very uncomfortable experience.

Response to the dilemma. The principal at this point had used up much of his credit with the faculty. Perhaps for that reason, he did not take a strong public stand for or against the innovation, but instead responded with a number of interim measures which helped avoid criticism and allowed him to ride out the storm.

One approach was to seek stronger support for the innovation from district administrators and, in so doing, to increase its legitimacy in the teachers' eyes. This measure met with little success. District backing was confined to encouragement and personal expressions of support. Another approach was to extend participation in the decision-making process to all levels, including parents and students, and to increase the extent to which the principal consulted the faculty in making decisions. However, while this made decision making more representative, it also increased the variety of ideas

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Conclusions

Many studies have examined the effects of environmental pressures or of organizational structure on innovation. While our study deals with both of these factors, it is less concerned with their independent effects than with the way their interaction may help determine the process of innovation, affecting the type of innovation that is adopted, the way it is implemented, and the response to its attempted implementation. The Hillview case study has documented an example of an innovative process that was strongly, and adversely, affected by the interaction of these factors. Diffuse pressures for major change were imposed upon a differentiated structure with weak leadership, resulting in a poorly articulated response, and, ultimately, in the rejection of the innovation. A similar process may have led to the failure of many other educational innovations.

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